

May 9, 2014

The Honorable Judge Madeline Hughes Haikala  
United States District Court  
Hugo L. Black U. S. Courthouse  
1729 Fifth Avenue North  
Birmingham, AL 35203

Re: 5:63-cv-00109-MHH, Hereford et al v. Huntsville Board of Education

Dear Judge Haikala,

I am writing today in support of Huntsville City Schools (HCS). I am active in the school system as a parent of a child in HCS, student mentor, substitute teacher and member of the Parent Teacher Association. During the years my child has been a student I have kept abreast of education related issues by regularly attending HCS school board meetings and related events, communicating with HCS officials, teachers and principals, and researching education related issues. It is imperative that decisions are made and actions taken based on facts and supporting data and with priority given to what is best for the students.

My observations and understanding of the facts allow me to write with steadfast confidence in support of HCS, especially since the hire of our Superintendent of Schools, Dr. E. Casey Wardynski, in August 2011. From the start Dr. Wardynski and the school board have set clear goals to ensure *all* schools have the same high quality standards and expectations for student achievement. The goals address the key attributes that ensure student success by focusing on academics, a positive and safe learning environment, access to nutritious meals, financial stability, transportation, and new or improved facilities.

Why do I support HCS? I have compiled a list of reasons based on data and information available on the HCS website and presented at HCS school board meetings, and related events.

1. The current HCS leadership and school board have taken actions to encourage the desegregation of racially identifiable schools through use of majority to minority transfers, development of magnet schools and programs, expansion of International Baccalaureate programs, and shifting the hiring of teachers and staff from individual schools to the HCS District level to ensure balance of talent and racial diversity at all schools. This is clearly reflected in the goals set by the HCS School Board for the superintendent, "Develop program to strengthen Magnet Programs... Show progress in racial balance of staffing at all schools." (Source: Superintendent Evaluation Framework for June 2013 to May 2014)
2. Another Goal set by the HCS School Board is to "Increase the minority student enrollment in AP classes." (Source: Superintendent Evaluation Framework for June 2013 to May 2014) AP courses were discontinued at Johnson and Butler High Schools (racially identifiable black high schools) prior to the arrival of the current superintendent. HCS has since returned and expanded AP course offerings to these high schools by applying and regaining A+ College Ready Program membership during the 2012-13 school year. About a third more AP classes are offered at Grissom High School (racially identifiable white high school) than Johnson High School,

however, this is because there is about a third more students at Grissom High School than Johnson High School. (Source: Doc 287-1 Exhibit A of Case 5:63-cv-00109-MHH filed with U.S. District Court, North District of Alabama on 02/26/14)

3. Graduation rates are increasing. All but one high school exceeded the state graduation goal of 72% in 2013. Although Butler High School did not exceed the state goal their graduation rates increased by 18 points between 2011 and 2013. Johnson and Lee High Schools graduation rates improved by 16 and 18 points respectively.
4. Grade level student proficiency in Reading and Math has improved from the Fall of 2011 to present. In reading, student proficiency is up from 47% to 67% and from 60% to 78% in Math.
5. Disciplinary issues have declined. In-school suspensions are down 29%. Out-of-school suspensions are down by 27%. Student Incident Reports are down 38%. Arrest numbers are down from 372 during the 2011-12 school year to a projected 75 arrests during the current school year (2013-14). Student arrests on HCS campuses have declined by 74% between last school year and the current school year.
6. Sixty percent of at-risk students have the opportunity to take part in a high quality Pre-K program and 23 of the 38 Pre-K classes are locally funded.
7. HCS successfully implemented and expanded the Breakfast in the Classroom Program at Title I schools as HCS recognized that this program increases attendance and improves a child's ability to learn. Breakfast in the classroom participation rates at Title I schools during the 2010-11 school year ranged between 34% and 58% (depending on the individual school). During the 2012-13 school year participation rates increased to between 83% and 99% (depending on the individual school).
8. In 2013, HCS implemented the Summer Feeding Program and served over 98,000 meals. This is three times more than any other school district in Alabama. This summer HCS, in collaboration with the City of Huntsville, is providing free bus rides to any child in the community and their families to schools participating in the Summer Feeding Program.
9. Each school has a defined set of goals. For example, at Davis Hills Middle School, a Title I school, the following goals to be met by 2015 were set. Increase student proficiency in Math and Reading by 20%; last year proficiencies increased by 36% and 12%. Reduce discipline infractions by 20%; last year infractions declined by 39 – 49%.
10. Although it is not required by any governing agency, HCS provides bus transportation to students living more than five miles from campus. Further, when considering the specific needs of students that will attend the new McNair Junior High and Jemison High Schools HCS will expand bus services to include students living more than two miles from campus. It is my understanding that many of the students that will attend McNair and Jemison schools walk to school and are frequently absent when it is raining or too cold.
11. The superintendent and school board have brought the school system out from under a debt of about \$19.5 million to a projected \$34.5 million in the black this year. Further, by replacing 1.8 million square feet of old schools with 1.1 million square feet of new schools, improving efficiencies and the sale of retired schools (among other things) it is projected that HCS will achieve a recurring annual operating savings of \$5 million dollars; funds that can be used elsewhere to the direct benefit of the students.

These improvements that target the key elements to ensure student achievement have occurred in the last three years under the current superintendent and school board and show progress toward making sure *all* schools flourish.



I believe the resistance to HCS's Student Assignment Plan has much to do with misinformation and adult matters that are not in the best interest of the students, nor to the benefit of the HCS System or the greater community. I have witnessed and experienced the willingness of the superintendent and the HCS School Board to engage with the community. For example, community conversation forums were held at each of the six high schools on January 30<sup>th</sup> & 31<sup>st</sup> and February 1<sup>st</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> & 5<sup>th</sup>, in the evenings and on a Saturday, to provide ample opportunity for citizens to learn about HCS's Student Assignment Plan, ask questions, and discuss concerns with the superintendent, school board members and supporting staff. I attended and appreciated the thoroughness of the information and accessibility of the superintendent and staff to answer questions. The community conversation forums provided information above and beyond HCS's Student Assignment Plan including AP course offerings, the various high school career academies, dual enrollment and IB programs, transportation and facilities. There was also a Geographic Information System (GIS) set up, so parents could enter their addresses to see which schools their children would be attending based on the reassignment plan. Information from the community conversations, as well as, PowerPoint presentations given at HCS board meetings and other public forums are also available on HCS's website for citizens to view in case one could not attend.

In the years that I have been attending HCS school board meetings those of us that regularly attend and are engaged in HCS related matters have gotten to know each other. We know or know of those who are the reasonable and positive forces within the HCS system. We also recognize those citizens who show up occasionally and are sometimes unwilling to listen to reason even when presented with supporting facts and data and despite clear explanation. I am saddened by how quickly the positive measures and outcomes are dismissed by those who are not as engaged and/or misinformed. I believe the resistance exhibited by some is due to an historical distrust that precedes the current superintendent and must not be allowed to overshadow the positive measures underway that benefit our students.

I have attended community meetings in North Huntsville when education related topics are on the agenda. I found it odd that our elected state board of education representative or other education expert was not invited to speak on state education standards, and it seemed odd to me that County Commissioner Harrison held a public forum on education on the same day and time as a prescheduled HCS Board of Education meeting. On April 23, 2014 I attended "A Mass Community Meeting" at First Missionary Baptist Church. The North Huntsville leadership presented its position paper on the Student Reassignment Plan. The position contained misinformation that has now been passed along at this widely attended community meeting. If only the leadership had based their position on the facts and accurate information provided at the school board meetings and community conversations, etc. (that are available on HCS's website), or allow the superintendent and school board, all present at the meeting, to respond to all questions posed during the meeting perhaps we could have united and moved forward in support of what is best for the students.

From the "Watercress Capital of the World" of the 1930s to the post WWII "Rocket City" I have firm confidence that HCS is on a trajectory of greatness that will put our children on a path to success in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and Huntsville City Schools on the global map of

excellence in education. This can only happen if adults will do what is best for the students based on facts and sound reason.

With sincerity and respect for your time and consideration,

B. Wilder

B Wilder

cc: J.R. Brooks

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